



# DEATH CERTIFICATE

- Natural
- Accident
- Suicide
- Homicide
- Undetermined



# CRITERIA for DETERMINING SUICIDE

- Self-inflicted
  - Supported by autopsy, toxicology, investigatory, and psychological evidence and statements from the decedent and witnesses
- Intent
  - Evidence that at the time of the injury, the decedent intended to kill him/herself or wished to die, and the decedent understood the probable consequences of his/her actions

# CALIFORNIA LAW REGARDING DECEDENT'S INTENT

## **Searle v. Allstate Life Insurance Company 38 Cal. 3d 425 (1985)**

Mr. Searle killed himself with GSW to head.

Wife contested the life insurance company's decision after death ruled a suicide.

CA Supreme Court ruled that mental capacity was very relevant to the determination of suicidal intent.

**“If the insured did not understand the physical nature and consequences of the act, whether he was sane or insane, then he did not intentionally kill himself.”**



# CONTRIBUTION OF MENTAL HEALTH

**Dr. Theodore J. Curphey, Los Angeles County  
Chief Medical Examiner-Coroner, started  
pioneering work with the Suicide Prevention  
Center (SPC) for help in clarifying the manner of  
death**



# PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY

- The Approach was developed in late 1950's by Drs. Robert Litman, Norman Farberow, and Edwin Schneidman of the SPC
- Thorough retrospective analysis of decedent's intention and state of mind as related to his/her actions at time of death



# NEED for PSYCHOLOGICAL AUTOPSY in MANNER OF DEATH DETERMINATIONS

- In equivocal cases when the Dept. of Coroner cannot determine whether the decedent's death was a suicide or an accident
- When the Dept. of Coroner rules the death a suicide, but there is a protest (someone contests the manner of death)



## 1987 to PRESENT

- USC Institute of Psychiatry and Law,  
psychological consultants to LA Dept. of Coroner
- Conduct psychological autopsy only when  
possible manner of death is between suicide and  
accident
- Evaluation is **CONFIDENTIAL TO DEPT. OF  
CORONER ONLY**



# APPROACH USED

- Consent form
- Team of psychiatrists and clinical psychologists
- Sources of information

# MODE CONFERENCE